

Opinion

The growing problem of violence against older persons in Africa

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Abstract

This paper examines the growing problem of violence against older persons, particularly older women, in developing countries in general and in African countries in particular. An attempt is made to set out the nature and scale of the problem, and to examine some consequences of violence for older persons, based on local experience of HelpAge International (HAI) partners. Finally, selected innovative interventions designed and implemented by HAI partners to address the problem are described.

Background

A combination of the rapidly rising percentage of persons who are living to an advanced age, falling fertility rates and "shocks," such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic, has created a dramatic change in the population structure of many developing countries. It is estimated that the HIV/AIDS epidemics will reduce life expectancy at birth by up to 20 years in some southern African countries (US Bureau of the Census, 1999). The majority of individuals who die from AIDS-related illnesses are in the 20-40-year age group, which mortality will have as yet unpredictable longer-term effects for population structures. However, the shrinking size of this age group in populations as a result of AIDS-related mortality in affected countries is placing great strains on older persons, who are obliged to assume new roles as caregivers to adult children with AIDS and eventually as surrogate parents to orphaned grandchildren.

The great majority of older persons in developing countries live in their own homes, connected to their families and communities, but socio-economic change is placing increasing pressure on these arrangements (Peil, 1995). Rapid urbanisation and job-related migration are significantly altering family and community relationships. Urban living, with restrictions on physical space, makes the close proximity of a relatively large number of family members of different generations problematic. Family structures are undergoing radical change in some societies. The care of older family members is falling on fewer children and the impact is felt most by those with the least resources. Poverty is a critical risk factor for older persons in developing countries in general and widespread poverty within communities contributes to the stress felt by families.

Thus, although the demographic revolution has brought about enormous benefits in the shape of greater longevity and a healthier old age for many, it has also presented new chal-

lenges. The stresses of rapid change have substantially increased the potential for family and community breakdown, which may find expression in the abuse of vulnerable members and, in extreme cases, violence against them. However, one should guard against making over-simplistic connections between social change and growing family and community tensions. Although there is evidence of the abuse of older persons in "traditional" societies, family and community structures also show a remarkable resilience in the face of rapid and often disruptive social change (Cattell, 1997). Nevertheless, there is a growing body of evidence that older people are at increasing risk of abuse and violence, and it is important to understand the degree to which rapid change plays a role in increasing older persons' risk of abuse.

A hidden problem

The abuse and neglect of older persons have been slow to gain recognition as a problem, even in countries where older populations are demographically established. In developing countries, abuse and violence towards these persons have tended to be viewed as problems faced primarily by countries of the North, where it is believed that family and social breakdown has undermined traditional relationships. Such problems have not generally been identified as concerns for the South. However, I strongly suggest that abuse of older persons is a major problem in developing countries, notwithstanding the fact that it is rarely discussed. It is also one that needs to be better understood and addressed.

In part, a lack of debate in developing countries on violence against older persons reflects a double hiatus: a scarcity of information and knowledge about the issue and a problem in the definition of abuse/violence. Gaps in knowledge and a lack of information are broadly addressed below. The definition of what constitutes violence or abuse though is complex – yet important to an understanding of the nature and extent of the problem. Abuse may of course take a number of forms, not all of which are violent. Physical abuse may include not only physical injury but also malnutrition, or the withholding of physical care. Psychological, or emotional abuse, such as threats, verbal assault or isolation, may occur even where physical violence is absent (Biggs, Phillipson & Kingston, 1996). I examine the problem of violence against older persons primarily as physical abuse in both domestic and community settings. I also examine some effects of violence, even where the violence is not directed at older persons, inasmuch as they impact negatively on these persons. Thus for the

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present purpose, violence is recognized as including military conflict as well as community violence and crime.

The extent of the problem

An immediate problem arises in any attempt to quantify the extent of violence which affects older persons in developing countries. Very few quantifiable data are available in this regard and we must therefore rely heavily on anecdotal evidence. The problem is further exacerbated in that many of these countries lack basic data on the characteristics of the older population. For example, very few countries have age or gender disaggregated data for their older population. Neither is much known of the living conditions of older persons in family and community settings in these countries, nor about factors which may contribute to an increased risk and vulnerability of specific groups of older persons to abuse and violence. Neither has much research been done on family relationships, the status of older people in communities and the image of old age in specific societies.

Nevertheless, despite these gaps in knowledge, there is a growing body of evidence from a number of the countries that elder abuse, specifically violence against older people, is a significant problem in these societies. Much of this evidence is anecdotal and emanates from media reports. This in itself may be significant, in that the media may be reflecting and informing growing public concern about the problem. Older people themselves certainly recognise elder abuse as a critical concern for them. A demonstration by a group of 800 older people against alleged pension fraud in KwaZulu-Natal Province of South Africa in May 1999, for example, linked demands for adequate pensions and health care with an end to physical and sexual violence against older people (*Mail & Guardian*, 1999). Notwithstanding an increase in evidence such as this, the problem is exacerbated by too little discussion and poor understanding of the problem.

Violence in the family

Violence against older persons within the family is understandably a sensitive issue and one which is seldom discussed – which makes a search for evidence in this area more problematic. Family members who may be at greatest risk of abuse or violence may be those whose productive value to the household has declined, or whose status within the family has undergone an abrupt change. Older household members are clearly at a particular risk here. In a number of developing countries abuse and violence against older persons are increasingly commonplace. For example, in Africa the death of a household head is frequently a signal for relatives to claim his assets, and often physical violence is used against the widow in doing so.

'Chasing off' or 'grabbing property', the experience of widows losing their property to relatives in inheritance disputes, is now so common in Africa that the terms have become incorporated in the vernacular languages... Widows' complaints about relatives robbing them of their husband's estate make up the major part of the caseloads in women's legal aid clinics in Africa (Owen, 1996: 59).

In Ngara district of western Tanzania, attacks by younger relatives on older family members have reportedly increased in recent years, owing in part to general instability in the community as a result of the presence of refugee camps in the wake of the Rwandan crisis of the mid-1990s. The refugee camps were sources for the purchase of weapons and this created a destabilising effect in surrounding communities (HelpAge International, 1995). Family disputes, sometimes

aggravated by drunkenness, have also been blamed for a rise in the number of violent attacks on older persons (HAI, 1999).

Cases such as the above, as well as lesser ones involving the withdrawal of support from older family members, have led to the enactment of laws in a number of African countries to protect older people. However, this legislation remains largely unenforced, mainly because of the unwillingness of older persons to incur the shame of prosecuting their own children. Indeed, legislation intended to protect older persons can negatively impact them. Tanzanian inheritance law provides that widowed women may remain on their dead husband's land until their own death. However, they do not own the property, which is inherited by the sons of the family. This tradition, intended to protect widows, may thus become an incentive to desire the early death of a troublesome "tenant" (HAI, 1999). Inheritance questions seem to provide fertile ground for family disputes. Stories, such as one titled "Grandma, 82, kicked out of her house" (*Weekly Spectator*, 1995), appear in the press in numerous African countries. The story concerned a dispute between a grandmother and her grandchildren over the inheritance of her deceased daughter's property. The disputed will, the grandmother's illiteracy and the forcible seizure of property by the grandchildren are staples of many inter-generational disputes in African countries.

Violence in the community

Of particular concern, because of numerous reports in the media, is violence directed at older persons as a result of witchcraft allegations. In a number of African countries, accusations of witchcraft are common and tend to follow a pattern. The victims are often isolated, single older persons, typically women. In societies where widowed women lose their property rights, many will be isolated and vulnerable. Folk myths about the characteristics of witches often fit those of older women. Examples of such characteristics are red eyes, as a result of a lifetime of cooking over a smoky stove with poor quality fuel, and wandering in the night (HAI, 1999). Although the latter behaviour may be symptomatic of undiagnosed dementia, the behaviour and characteristics are seen to "prove" a case of witchcraft.

Accusations of witchcraft are frequently linked to unexplained events in local communities, such as a sudden death of a resident or a crop failure. In recent years the high numbers of deaths as a result of AIDS-related illnesses have been blamed in some areas on witchcraft. Although victims of witchcraft are typically older women, older men with property or other assets are also victimised in this way. Frequently, it is traditional healers who accuse individuals of being witches. In many communities, these persons retain a great deal of informal influence, particularly where modern health facilities are scarce and health-care services are expensive. However, traditional healers are also attacked and murdered, and an ambivalence may be noted in persistent beliefs in the powers of traditional medicine.

There also appears to be a link between rapid social and economic change and upsurges in witchcraft accusations. In South Africa, the release of Nelson Mandela from prison in 1990 resulted, as Judge J.C. van der Walt commented in his review of the evidence of a witchcraft assault case, "... in jubilation over the historic event which led to the forming of mobs which then went on the rampage, and killed people who were identified as witches or wizards" (Ralushai, Masingi, Madiba *et al.*, 1995). Noting that the victims of several similar cases were all older persons, the judge questioned why euphoria over a national hero should lead to murder? How-

ever, it has been suggested that South African courts bear a measure of responsibility for the ongoing violence relating to witchcraft accusations, since the sentencing of convicted perpetrators of witchcraft-related murders is perceptibly too lenient (Ralushai *et al.*, 1995).

Witchcraft accusations can have a devastating impact on older individuals, even when murder does not result. In South Africa, older women accused of witchcraft have been forced to leave their communities with their entire family, and many have found refuge only by camping at police stations. Even here they are not safe, as communities near police stations may demand their removal (Ralushai *et al.*, 1995). In Tanzania, older women are reported to be frightened to leave their homes and will not dare to confront potential accusers in the community (HAI, 1999).

Beliefs in witchcraft have very strong currency in numerous African communities and eradication of the beliefs is extremely difficult. Often older persons themselves perpetuate the beliefs. Cases of victimisation by groups of older persons in residential homes in Mozambique (cf. Walker, 1998) illustrate the pervasiveness of the beliefs.

Violence, insecurity and older persons

Violence need not be specifically aimed at older persons to impact them. Where community violence is endemic, older persons often become its victims because of their greater vulnerability. In Kingston, Jamaica, older persons have described how uncontrolled gang warfare has impacted them, limiting their mobility and increasing their overall sense of insecurity (Gorman, 1991). A similar picture has emerged from evidence from older residents of South African townships. A recent report notes the common occurrence of assault and robbery against older persons, including "disturbing numbers of cases of rape committed against older women, and a general sense of insecurity both in the home and out in the community" (Swart & Joubert, 1999). The transition countries of East and Central Europe provide clear parallels with the South African situation. Like South Africa, the countries have experienced both social and political upheaval and economic crisis in recent years. A result, which again compares closely with the South African situation, has been an upsurge in levels of general crime in some communities. Again, vulnerable older persons may easily become the victims of such crime. Political violence also impacts older persons. A report of Amnesty International (1998) on political violence in the Rift Valley of Kenya found that of 35 reported deaths, 14 were those of persons aged 55 years and over – a far higher proportion than that of older persons in the total population.

What can be done to combat violence?

It is important to contextualize the emerging picture of violence against older persons in Africa. On the one hand only a minority of older persons experience violence. Within most families older relatives are still respected and valued, and ties of kinship and affection remain strong. Most older persons are able and continue to participate in community life. On the other hand conditions for the occurrence of violence and abuse against older people are growing. Rapid, often disruptive social and economic change and endemic poverty contribute to a growing risk of abuse of vulnerable family and community members, young or old. Added to these conditions is the rising number of older persons who are potentially vulnerable to violence due to increased age, frailty and isolation, as well as growing pressure on family caregivers.

The impact of violence on the health of older persons is clear. In all the cases cited above, the results of violence will have had effects beyond the physical injury and the psychological damage inflicted on individual victims. Violence against individuals raises a level of fear and insecurity in older persons generally. For many older persons who already feel intimidated by rapid societal change, such insecurity is a serious blow to their morale and sense of well-being.

Thus it is important to look at ways to support and foster relationships that serve to empower and strengthen older persons' rights to a life free of violence (Biggs *et al.*, 1995). Such initiatives may be carried out through working with older persons to develop a sense of self-confidence in them. In South Africa, HelpAge International and the Muthande Society for the Aged, an HAI member organisation based in Durban, have worked together to develop an older persons' literacy programme in one of the city's most violent townships. This programme has resulted in older persons feeling more in control and less vulnerable when out in the community. In Tanzania, HelpAge International has developed a training programme for older people to work as paralegals and to advocate on behalf of other older persons who are particularly vulnerable to violence and abuse. The training focusses on legal aspects, such as Tanzanian law relating to marriage and inheritance, and includes counselling and mediation skills.

There is also a need to foster closer and more supportive inter-generational ties between family members. Recognising that intra-family abuse and violence are often caused by the strains of caregiving with inadequate resources, a number of HelpAge International's member organisations support programmes which offer respite care services to hard-pressed families. For example, HelpAge Sri Lanka and HelpAge India both support day-care centres which look after dependent elders. In Kerala State, HelpAge India is supporting an innovative programme which offers assistance to older persons with Alzheimer's disease. The incidence of dementias in developing countries is increasing rapidly, as populations age, and support services to family carers will be critical to maintain their well-being as well as that of older members.

It is also important to develop positive inter-generational relations beyond the family. In Tanzania, a HelpAge International programme targets schools, youth groups and other institutions, such as churches and mosques, to build an awareness of the roles and needs of older persons in their communities.

African countries experience a specific problem as a result of beliefs in witchcraft. Given the prominent role of traditional healers in many communities in hunting witches, it has been proposed that this role, whereby traditional healers are instigators of violence against persons which they brand as witches, should be carefully examined. In South Africa, a committee of investigation in the Northern Province has suggested that a code of conduct be introduced for *inyangas* (traditional healers). The practitioners are being urged to restrict their activities to curative and preventative medicine, rather than hunting witches. Finally, noting that attacks on older persons as witches are concentrated in communities where educational standards are low, the commission proposed a "serious programme of education to liberate people mentally ... from their belief in witchcraft" (Ralushai *et al.*, 1995). The aim of the programme is to challenge the perpetuation of negative beliefs associated with older persons, and thus to begin to undermine long-held and strongly-believed myths such as those pertaining to witchcraft.

Measures such as these significantly impact communities at two levels: First, the measures may be an immediate and practical response to a specific issue, through the provision of legal advice to older persons, or through educational programmes that begin to change attitudes. Behind these responses, and implicit in them, is a second level, one at which the rights of older people to physical and psychological security begins to be acknowledged. This "rights-based" approach affirms that older people should be enabled to participate fully in society and specifies what this implies in terms of their civil rights. It also forges links with the wider development debate, which asserts that there is a need to improve the physical, psychological and material security and well-being not only of older persons themselves, but also of the communities in which they live. The available evidence indicates that violence and the abuse of older persons in developing countries are strongly associated with poverty and growing material insecurity. Addressing the structural causes of poverty will have a significant impact on the physical and mental security and sense of well-being of older persons in poverty-stricken communities.


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